



Book review of Oxfeld, Ellen. 2010. Drink water, but remember the source: moral discourse in a Chinese village. Berkeley: University of California Press. 312 pp.

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Oxfeld, Ellen 2010. *Drink Water, But Remember the Source : Moral Discourse in a Chinese Village*. Berkley: University of California Press, 312pp., Pb.: \$24.95, £16.95, ISBN 978-0-52026-095-5

In October 2011, the tragic story of Yueyue, a two-year old girl who was run over twice by a van only to be ignored by no less than eighteen passersby, made headline news around the world, as did the so-called 'milk powder scandal' a few years earlier which culminated in the execution of two businessmen for their part in selling and distributing melamine-tainted milk powder which resulted in the deaths of at least six children and the harming of thousands more. These and similar episodes have led many to question whether the rise of global capitalism and consumerism has led to a 'moral crisis' or indeed 'moral vacuum' in China.

In *Drink Water, But Remember the Source*, Ellen Oxfeld productively uses this diagnosis of China's collective conscience as a backdrop against which to probe and analyse the "vibrant moral discourse" (p. 6) she found in a rural Chinese village. Indeed, *Drink Water* is Oxfeld's insightful call to arms as she protests that "the study of moral systems is undeveloped in anthropology as opposed to the examination of other domains of culture" (p. 225).

How then does Oxfeld find moral discourse in an apparent 'moral vacuum'? By changing both scale and optics. It is one thing to diagnose an entire nation's moral state, and another to explore moral discourse in a rural Chinese village. Moreover, if we, as Oxfeld does, embrace Caroline Humphrey's definition of morality as "the evaluation of conduct in relation to esteemed or despised human qualities" (p. 26), then public outcries and diagnoses of national moral crises can be seen as confirmations rather than negations of moral codes.

Oxfeld chooses a number of areas of social life as a way to organise the different 'schemas' of conduct evaluation that she has identified in her ethnographic data derived from numerous visits to and extended stays in the village of Moonshadow Pond in Meixian, Guangdong province over a period of more than a decade. Schemas are 'tools of thought', and Oxfeld suggests that it is through multiple and often contending schemas that moral judgements are made during the course of village life. The book's main chapters of analysis concern moral judgments – evaluations of conduct – in Moonshadow Pond in the context of ritual (weddings and funerals), return visits by emigrants, property disputes, money and family relations.

For Oxfeld, it is the notion of *liangxin* rather than *guanxi*, *mianzi* or *bao* that is most helpful for understanding moral discourse in Moonshadow Pond. *Liangxin* is often translated as 'conscience' yet is more than this since it "contains within it *both* that inner voice *and* the actions it should prompt" (p. 53, my emphasis). To be described as being 'without *liangxin*' will most often refer to a particular situation of conduct as it relates to past situations of conduct (hence the title of the book). And weddings, funerals or return visits by emigrants are occasions where such 'remembering' becomes ethnographically discernable when scorn or praise is directed at certain individuals for how their actions relate to already existing circuits of obligation, reciprocity and indebtedness. Evaluating conduct in terms of *liangxin* is essentially 'maritime' in the sense that it positions both laterally and longitudinally, and Oxfeld provides us with numerous ethnographic examples from the story of Skinny Hong who was freed from a labour camp only to forget those who had helped him to the cases of Slippery Cheng who was accused of selling collective land without compensating other team members and Sneaky Tao who wanted a share of profits from revenue generated from a rice husking machine stored in his shed.

In developing the notion of 'schemas' for understanding the ways in which fellow villagers' as well as returnees' conduct is evaluated in Moonshadow Pond, Oxfeld's monograph is a productive contribution to the theorising of social navigation. Oxfeld is careful to underline that in mapping out schemas of conduct evaluation she is not taking sides, rather she is attempting to identify logics and codes. And so, in a sense, Oxfeld's analysis is about 'taking gossip seriously', not for the sake of hearsay or drama, but rather because dissecting personal disputes and controversies in Moonshadow Pond (or any other setting) can help us understand the ways in which relations and actions are co-dependent. We are, nevertheless, left wondering how an analysis of moral 'schemas' might be carried out in one of China's many exploding mega-cities.

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